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ABSTRACT

Education in Israel before and after the passage of the State Education Law of 1953 is discussed. Prior to 1953, Israeli political parties operated and had total control over their own schools. Before statehood in 1948, a growing desire for national unity led some major parties to give up their separate schools and merge them into a school system or stream. Three school systems--the General, Religious, and Labor streams--existed in parallel until statehood in 1948, when they were joined by a fourth stream, the Ultra Orthodox (Agudat Israel). The State Education Law, passed in 1953, was a compromise. The various political parties agreed to transfer control of their separate schools to a central Ministry of Education and Culture. The compromise was to retain some religious differentiation in curriculum and school atmosphere within one national school system. Five types of schools were established: state secular, state religious, ultra orthodox, communal settlement schools, and Arab schools. The new law has resulted in less parent involvement in schools, but more equal educational attainment between Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews. (RM)

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Israeli Schools: Religious and Secular Problems

By Franklin Parker
October 10, 1984

Israel is a tiny semi-arid country about the size of New Jersey on the Mediterranean in the Middle East, populated by more than three million Jews and slightly more than half a million Arabs, the latter comprising 446,000 Muslims, 84,000 Christians, and 46,000 Druzes (members of an 11th-century offshoot of Islam).

To appreciate Israel's church and state relations in education, one must see the State Education Law of 1953 in perspective. That law formed a compromise by which various political parties and their coalitions agreed to transfer control of their separate schools to a central Ministry of Education and Culture. The compromise reached was to retain some religious differentiations in curriculum and school atmosphere within one national school system under state control and support. The resulting five types of schools reflect to this day Israel's religious and other divisions. Each of the 936,000 Jewish students below university level in 1980-81 attended one of the first four types of schools listed below, with the fifth one for Arabs:

<u>State Secular</u> schools enroll 65% of school-age Jewish youths, are considered to be religiously neutral, teach the Bible as literature, and give holy days their national and cultural meanings. Although Israel was established as a Jewish state in 1948, most Jews are not religiously observing or orthodox. A continuing problem is how to

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teach about the Jewish religion to these majority nonreligious state school students. The Ministry developed for them a "Jewish consciousness" curriculum but with uncertain results. The need is to find ways to teach what a Jew is, the meaning of Israel's troubled history, and the responsibilities of being citizens in a country under seige.

State Religious schools enroll 25% of school-age Jewish youths, are religious in that the Bible is taught as the Word of God and as moral literature, and the religious nature of holy days is emphasized.

Ultra Orthodox (Agudat Israel) schools enroll 6.5% of school-age Jews, are extremely religious, require Bible study, strictly observe holy days, follow dietary laws, dress distinctively, and are religiously circumscribed in most other aspects of life.

Kibbutz, moshav, and other types of communal settlement schools, together with army-run schools, enroll 3.5% of school-age Jews, have varied religious emphases, and usually observe the Sabbath and other holy days. The Sabbath (Friday sunset to Saturday sunset) and other holy days are observed throughout Israel, with most transportation, commerce, and other work places largely closed in observance.

Arab schools enroll 183,500 (1980-81) Israeli Arab youths whose families remained in Israel after it became a Jewish state in 1948. The Arab schools are separate from Jewish schools, not by law but by geographical, linguistic, cultural, and religious differences. Often Arabs live in rural and border areas, their instruction is in Arabic rather than in Hebrew (used in Jewish schools), and their schools emphasize their faith and customs. In

schools as in society, there is all too little contact between Jew and Israeli Arab.

Arabs and Jews have the same school ladder: one year of kindergarten at age 5; six years of elementary school, ages 6-12; three years of junior high school, ages 13-15; and three years of senior high, ages 16-18; the same 13 years of free (ages 5-18) education and 11 years of compulsory (ages 5-16) education, the same school-leaving and matriculation (Bagrut) exams, and the same salary scale for teachers. Hebrew is introduced to Arabs in the third year and English to both groups in the fifth year. The Ministry of Education and Culture works with Arab educators to develop an Arab-culture syllabus and Arabic textbooks.

A recent study shows the educational disadvantages of Israeli Arabs: 24% of Jews reach the university level, only 8% of Arabs do so; 9% of Jews over age 14 are illiterate, compared with 36.5% of Arabs over 14; 16% of Jewish teachers are unqualified, while 43% of Arab teachers are unqualified. Arab girls are traditionally kept at home, especially after early adolescence. In 1976, 42% of Arab children in elementary schools were girls, compared with 25% girls in Arab secondary schools.

These educational differences are reflected in disparities in the relative standards of living of the two groups: 98% of Jews own refrigerators, compared with only 54% of Arabs; 52% of Jews have telephones, compared with 7% of Arabs; 41% of Jews hold white-collar jobs, compared with 14.5% of Arabs. Understandably, Arab youths become increasingly negative toward Israel as they grow older.

Jewish life and education in Israel was and is shaped by many political parties which, in coalitions, compete daily for power and influence. These parties arose as self-help organizations and are more socio-economically and religio-politically oriented than are parties in the U.S.A. The associations and parties developed and supported their own schools for ideological reasons, to win adherents, and to perpetuate their religious, political, economic, and social beliefs. Parties were and remain total self-help communal enclaves. They hold together people with similar views; secure jobs, housing, and welfare; organize boys, girls, women, and men's clubs and activities; publish newspapers and books; and, until the 1953 State Education Law, had total control over the operation of their own schools.

For individuals, party affilation has meant security, unity, influence, and political leverage in local and national affairs. Parties have zealously guarded their preserves, including separate schools, and compromised in surrendering their schools to a national system only when it served their best interest and the national interest.

Before 1948 statehood, a growing desire for national unity and ultimate nationhood led some major parties to consider giving up their separate schools and merge them into a school system or "stream" (as the Israelis called it). The "General Stream" developed in 1913, after a language war, when those wanting Hebrew as the national language and the language of instruction won over those who had been using German as the language of instruction. The General Stream, formed by center (General Zionists) and rightist

(Revisionist) parties, agreed to have secular subjects taught in European-like modern schools of the time, and to forego formal religious instruction.

In 1920 a second school stream, the "Religious Stream," was formed by Zionist religious parties, led by Misrahi and Labor Misrahi (later the National Religious Party). The Religious Stream coalition also wanted a modern school system for national unity, was willing to forego such traditional religious schools as the Heder (religious elementary schools) and Talmud Torah (schools for the study of Jewish law), and, after much debate, reached uneasy agreement on religious and Zionist curricular emphases in its schools.

In 1926 a "Labor Stream" arose, mainly among rural (communal kibbutzim and moshavim) and urban workers, all strongly attached to the Histadrut (General Federation of Labor), imbued in the 1930s with child-centered progressive education ideals (similar to movements in the U.S.A., England, and elsewhere).

These three school systems--General, Religious, and Labor streams--existed in parallel and autonomous form until statehood in 1948, when they were joined by a fourth stream, the "Ultra Orthodox Agudat Israel" Stream, led by Israel's most religiously demanding group of zealots.

This was the situation when in 1953, amid stormy sessions, the Knesset (parliament) approved the compromise State Education Law, ending the parallel systems of education and substituting one uniform state system under a Ministry of Education and Culture, but with guarantees to continue the religious (or lack of it)

emphases demanded by the various constituencies.

What was gained and what was lost in the religious compromise brought about by the State Education Law of 1953? Under the pre-1953 education streams, parents and the public were more closely, intensely, and personally concerned. Education matters and the related religious issues were keenly debated. Having surrendered their partisan school streams in favor of one nationally administered school system, parents and the public became generally less actively involved and inevitably somewhat removed. The Arab wars provoked by Israel's statehood made defense for national survival the supreme need. The State Education Law of 1953 helped to free Israelis from preoccupation with debates on education, which became less pressing in face of sheer survival.

Also, religious issues in the education streams had taken attention away from the need to heal national divisions. European and American Jewish immigrants, called "Ashkenazic" Jews, dominated affairs before statehood. Less educated, more traditional Jews with larger and poorer families from Asian, North African, and Middle Eastern countries (called "Sephardic" Jews) began to outnumber Jews from Europe and the Americas. Sephardic girls were seldom sent to school, and if they were, they were removed soon after adolescence. The dropout rate of Sephardic boys was high. In general, Sephardic children did poorly in school and are still behind other students. The problem of equalizing educational achievement between Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews, not previously solved by the education streams,

was faced more resolutely and with greater resources by the Ministry of Education and Culture.

The Ministry has tried to close the gap between the advanced Ashkenazic students (45% of Jewish enrollment) and the less advanced Sephardic students (55% of Jewish enrollment). In recent years, young Sephardic mothers, mainly from North African countries, have been taught to use games with their children. Young mothers with little education but much potential were used to train other mothers in small groups. Encouraging Sephardic children to talk early helped their later learning. Another experiment was to pay selected university students to tutor disadvantaged children twice weekly. Some 9,000 university students were hired in this tutorial program in September 1980. Army life and schools have also helped, as have the rising numbers of Ashkenazic-Sephardic marriages (27% of all marriages in 1979).

Pluses and minuses abound in contrasting the pre-1953 Jewish education streams and the current state school system. Party members supporting each stream searched their collective minds and souls on such basic questions as: What is the culture of Israel? What is the nature of its society? How are Jews to remain the people of the Book? How can Jews remain true to their ancient quest for God?

Pursuit of these questions preoccupied Jews who backed the old school streams and was an important reason for their being. These questions remain today the core beneath the storm and stress of Israeli life. But the directness with which the old education stream partisans addressed these themes is no more. The Ministry

of Education and Culture has had to deal with pressing practicalities: waves of newer and less educated immigrants; newer generations of teachers and students concerned more with the present and future than with the Jewish past; and the defense preoccupations of a heavily taxed, security-conscious, beleaguered people. Yet the search goes on in Israeli synagogues and schools for the Jews' place as a religious entity and as a national people.

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(This paper is based in part on author's participation in interviews, lectures, and discussion at a Middle East Institute at Tel Aviv University, Israel, Summer 1980.)

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